

Montgomery County to trim \$32.2 million from budget

Vote could result in layoffs for some administrative staff

by Erin Cunningham | Staff Writer

More than 20 administrative staff working in Montgomery County's fire stations could lose their jobs as part of \$32.2 million in budget reductions approved by the County Council on Tuesday.

The council voted unanimously to trim the administrative staff rather than cut paid firefighters. It also made cuts to social programs, recreation services and schools.

About \$19.2 million in Montgomery County Public Schools funding will be eliminated — 1 percent of the school system's \$2.1 billion budget for fiscal 2011.

The cuts approved by the council Tuesday are about \$4 million less than the \$36 million in cuts County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) proposed earlier this month.

The county's Fire Chief Richard Bowers said the council's decision would not harm public safety. He said the eliminated positions, most of which are filled, cost county government \$632,000, but the workers are employed by the volunteer fire companies.

A council committee recommended keeping the administrative jobs and making cuts elsewhere that could have affected firefighters. But Councilman Marc Elrich (D-At large) of Takoma Park proposed keeping "boots on the ground" and eliminating the office workers.

Bowers said the positions duplicate a service already performed by county employees who oversee facilities and billing at the fire stations.

Leggett encouraged the council before the vote to cut the county's budget by \$36 million or more, saying the cuts were needed to give the county a head start in filling a projected \$300 million budget shortfall in fiscal 2012.

"We're going to come back next spring with further reductions," Leggett told the council.

Leggett already has asked most department heads, excluding those in public safety, to identify about 15 percent of their budgets for possible cuts in fiscal 2012.

The cuts the council approved Tuesday will help offset a \$90 million draw from the county's reserve funds that the county says it needs to pay for programs, services and personnel for the remainder of the fiscal year.

Bowers said if the volunteer firefighters have available money from fundraising efforts they could pay for the administrative staff, meaning that no employees might be laid off as a result of the cuts.

Eric Bernard, executive director of the county's Volunteer-Fire Rescue Association, could not be reached for comment by deadline Tuesday.

Councilman Philip M. Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg supported keeping the administrative positions, saying that the proposal calls for five employees to do the work that had been done by more than 20. Leggett had not provided any proof that the work could be done, Andrews said.

Councilman Roger Berliner (D-Dist. 1) of Potomac questioned whether the cuts to administrative staff were a type of payback for the county's volunteer association, which lobbied against a county ambulance fee supported by Leggett.

The volunteer association worked to put the fee on the Nov. 2 general election ballot; it was defeated by voters.

The council also voted Tuesday to eliminate a volunteer recruiter, who is paid more than \$40,000.

"It is difficult to escape the notion that we are trying to make the volunteers pay for their opposition to the ambulance fee," Berliner said.

Council members said they regretted many of the cuts they approved Tuesday, but that they were necessary to balance the county's budget.

Councilman George L. Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park proposed meeting Leggett's original target of \$36.2 million to help the county begin saving money now. Leventhal's proposal drew support from Councilwoman Nancy M. Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park but no others.

"If we don't stop spending on something now, we don't save any money," he said.

During a meeting with Leggett, Leventhal said the council will have to monitor the county's reserve fund, which was nearly depleted last year before the council filled a \$1 billion budget shortfall for the current fiscal year and established a plan to put more money in reserves.

Timothy Firestine, the county's chief administrative officer, said the county's projected reserve for fiscal 2011 had been \$136.8 million, but that it now stood at \$46.1 million.

"We could find ourselves in the situation we did a few months ago when the county literally ran out of cash," Leventhal said. "We're going to have to monitor the reserves like our family checkbook."